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Relational Missiology. When Mission Gets In Between

Whenever theologians voice their opinions on the subject of *Mission: the future of the Church*, the views expressed are many and varied. This being the year that marks the 500th anniversary of the Reformation, it is important to emphasise that there is consensus – both within the Catholic Church and far beyond – that the Church's mission cannot today be viewed primarily in territorial terms. There is also unanimous agreement that in the twenty-first century, the days when Christian mission could be seen as an act of Church or ideological expansion are long gone. Yet while it is easy for the Church to dissociate itself from an outdated understanding of mission, it is all the more difficult to outline what a future-proof understanding of mission in the third millennium might be.

All manner of interesting word combinations are being coined, including *missio ad gentes*, *missio ad extra*, *missio ad intra*, *missio ad altera*, *missio ad vulnera*, *missio ad alienus* (Hünemann), and even *missio ad mulieribus*. The coining of these combinations of terms suggests a clarity with regard to one's own understanding of mission combined with either an intellectual openness, or a lack of clarity of thought regarding which of the options is actually being realised in one's own missionary activity. At best, one could speak of an openness regarding the direction that must be given to a missionary dynamic. One could, however, also speak of a lack of orientation or of an understanding of mission that is merely looking for subjects (or even objects?) to whom the Church mission feels a sense of obligation or to whom the mission *applies* in the first place.

What is striking about all the terms listed above is that they all include the preposition *ad* as if it were a matter of course. This presumably stems from the fact that the terminology of the Decree on the Missionary Activity of the Church *Ad Gentes* is unconsciously deemed normative and is consequently ever present in the mind when discussing the subject of mission. This makes

the appearance of the term *missio inter gentes* all the more interesting, as it consciously does away with the preposition *ad*. This term has recently cropped up in the European discourse on missiology, but has previously been the subject of increased debate – in Asia too in particular – in recent years (Tan 2004a; 2004b; Keradec 2011; Prior 2014). To my mind, what is key here is neither the term *missio* nor the term *gentes*, but the relationship between the two terms, which is established by the preposition *inter*. The reason for this is that in future, the essence of mission is indeed likely to be understood more in terms of the relational activity in the spaces between an *I* and a *you* or – for example in the field of ecclesiology – within a *we*.

Missiology as advocate for a relational theology

Such a relational understanding of mission ties up with a relational understanding of theology, which distinguishes itself from a reductive emphasis on cognitions, dogmas, or even ideologies by emphasising the relational character of Christianity. Having himself spent many years as the Catholic Church's supreme *defender of the faith*, Benedict XVI wrote the following in his landmark encyclical *Deus Caritas est*: "Being Christian is not the result of an ethical choice or a lofty idea, but the encounter with an event, a person, which gives life a new horizon and a decisive direction" (Benedict XVI 1), Pope Francis cites this key sentence from his predecessor's encyclical on a number of occasions, among others in *Evangelii Gaudium* (Francis 2013, 7), after previously having said in his landmark exhortation that cultivating the relationship with Christ is the main challenge for all Christians and calling on all Christians "everywhere, at this very moment, to a renewed personal encounter with Jesus Christ, or at least an openness to letting him encounter them; I ask all of you to do this unfailingly each day" (Francis 2013, 3).

So both Benedict XVI and Pope Francis encourage us to cultivate our relationship with Christ and to recognise the relationship with Christ as the most important aspect of Christianity. The theological development of a relational Christology that is connected to a relational and trinitarian understanding of God corresponds to this exhortation. In this context, God's action can be reflected as a relational action that is about as static as God himself and does not primarily take the form of an ontological lithograph, but rather (also) recreates itself anew over and over again in biographical processes.

Missiology as advocate for a relational understanding of faith

Missiology can gain such a relational understanding of God not only in its encounters with indigenous cultures and can channel this understanding into the theological discourse, it can also experience it anew when theologizing. To my mind, communicative theology seems to have succeeded in doing this in an exemplary manner. Writing about communicative theology, Bernd Jochen Hilberath says the following:

According to the evidence in the Bible, God has frequently shown himself to be a God who is both capable of relationships and willing to enter into them. At the same time, it is revealed that God does not need people to be God, to have relationships. He is, in himself, rich in relationships: relationship is at the origin. The revelation of God happens in word and deed. Christians believe that in himself, God not only has a Word for all eternity, but (also) is the Word and that this Word (the “logos” of “theos”) became man, not just “as if”, but in the flesh. God’s relationship to people has, therefore, originally the character of logos or a word, is communicative (Hilberath 13).

In this way, it becomes clear that content and path, the material and the formal dimension cannot be separated from one another in theological discourse. Even fixed content is only ever a momentary snapshot of one’s own, ever-contextual pilgrimage of faith.

Missiology as advocate for a relational understanding of religion

A relational missiology may also be advocate for a relational understanding of religion¹ by discussing questions relating to an exclusivistic, inclusivistic, or pluralistic understanding of religion and searching for ways of interreligious dialogue or encouraging people to shape interreligious relations in a new way. In this Age of Globalisation, this interreligious dialogue is a key task for Christianity. Karl Lehmann listed criteria for a relational interreligious dialogue that go beyond intellectual evaluation criteria. He points to the fact that out of consideration for the individual nature of religious convictions, dialogue must first and foremost be authentic. It must also abstain from bias and power play, and the dialogue partners should view each other as equals. In dialogue, no partner should seek to prove the other wrong and should also

¹ Because religion and culture – as the term interculturality rightly points out – cannot ultimately be separated, missiology can also be viewed as advocate for a relational understanding of culture.

have the courage to admit his/her own *weaknesses*. In addition, dialogue must be characterised by a willingness to identify errors in one's own thoughts and actions and to admit to these errors in an open and sincere manner. Every religion that enters into dialogue must measure itself against these criteria and ask itself whether it meets the basic requirements or *minimum standards* of an interreligious relationship (Lehmann 590).²

Missiology as advocate for a relational ecclesiology

Such a relational understanding of theology leads to the development of a relational ecclesiology. In *Amoris Laetitia*, Pope Francis puts the case for such a relational ecclesiology, which constitutes a considerable challenge in this Age of Interculturality or Globalisation if we are to live Church in a sustainable manner, pointing to the fact that while unity is necessary in the Church, this unity should not be misconstrued as uniformity and

does not preclude various ways of interpreting some aspects of that teaching or drawing certain consequences from it. This will always be the case as the Spirit guides us towards the entire truth (cf. Jn 16:13), until he leads us fully into the mystery of Christ and enables us to see all things as he does (Francis 2016, 3).

In this context, Pope Francis encourages the development of regionally adapted approaches when he writes: "Each country or region, moreover, can seek solutions better suited to its culture and sensitive to its traditions and local needs. For "cultures are in fact quite diverse and every general principle... needs to be inculturated, if it is to be respected and applied" (Francis 2016, 3). With reference to the emphasis on one's own dignity of context and the local Churches that develop within them, it is helpful that Pope Francis also encourages the development of a relational concept of truth, thereby calling for a decentralisation of the Church. In *Evangelii Gaudium*, he writes:

Nor do I believe that the papal magisterium should be expected to offer a definitive or complete word on every question which affects the Church and the world. It is not advisable for the Pope to take the place of local Bishops in the discernment of every issue which arises in their territory. In this sense, I am conscious of the need to promote a sound "decentralization" (Francis 2013, 16).

² Karl Lehmann is of the opinion that religion is required to respect the dignity of all people, promote the freedom of people, help people in their search for meaning and their search for security, not to use force in its sense of mission, and to work for a negative and position freedom of religion (especially for those of a different faith too).

As advocate for a relational ecclesiology, relational missiology stresses the necessity of cultivating a new dialogue between local churches. Long gone are the days when representatives of the European local church could proclaim their theological statements to be universally applicable without noticing the Eurocentrism in the formulation of their theology, a Eurocentrism that future generations will probably view as provincialism. It was none other than Joseph Ratzinger, who wrote the following on this subject half a century ago: “we must at last admit to ourselves that Christianity, in the form in which it has been preserved for centuries, is no better understood here than it is in Asia and Africa.” (Ratzinger, 187-188)

Relational ecclesiology and dialogue

The challenge inherent in a relational ecclesiology is to cultivate not only dialogue with the whole world, dialogue with those who belong to a different faith, and dialogue with other Christians, but also to cultivate anew the dialogue within the Church in particular. In his first encyclical, *Ecclesiam Suam*, Pope Paul VI described this kind of dialogue as a dialogue in four concentric circles. For a start, it is about listening and discovering oneself anew in the encounter with the other. Ultimately, it is about Christians learning to experience themselves anew in their relationality:

People can only develop autonomy, the ability to articulate, dignity, the ability to judge, and creativity if they experience themselves as part of a network of relationships. They can only be people in the full sense of the word when they can love, listen, answer, and pray. In other words, when they have learned to live “in relation” to you, to the other, to the environment, to God – all in a “dialogical existence” (Martin Buber) (Schalück 157).

A relational ecclesiology is based on the fact that no one feels forced to adhere intrasubjectively to (ideological) dogmas and to communicate them intersubjectively as binding. Instead, a relational ecclesiology implies religiously sensitive identities, whereby one’s own identity may not be experienced as a rigid construct, but as a living flux or as growth, and religious identity creates itself anew in particular in relation to dialogue partners (Buber).

A missiology that is advocate for a relational concept of God, advocate for a relational Christology, advocate for a relational understanding of faith, and advocate for a relational ecclesiology, knows that it is first and foremost committed to dialogue and thrives, in a special way, on what is *in between*. In this context, it is this *in between* in particular that becomes a *locus theologicus*: if

one observes a flock of birds, one is moved to ask how the flock manages to get into formation and then to adjust this formation from one second to another as if implementing a long rehearsed choreography. Ornithologists assume that this heavenly spectacle is not the result of a command issued by one single bird, but a phenomenon that some scientists call *morphic resonance* (Boff and Hathaway 137). In this context, it is not important whether this theory of *morphic resonance* can be proven empirically. The ability of the flock of birds to create ever new harmonies and formations without being instructed to do so by a single subject at least illustrates how processes that go beyond what a single individual can initiate come about through interaction. This shows what can be experienced in a relational missiology: it is only within a relation that something that can be seen can come about in the first place.

Because God gets in between

A relational understanding of mission can just as easily be conceived as *missio inter gentes* as it can *missio inter altera*, *missio ad vulnera*, *missio ad alto*, *missio inter mulieribus*, etc. Relational missiology changes perspectives and encourages us to look at the spaces in between in which God realises himself, while at the same time discovering anew “the encounter with an event, a person, which gives life a new horizon and a decisive direction” (Benedict XVI, 1).

ABSTRACT

The addressees of the mission of the Church today cannot be defined in terms of territorial. As a result of numerous theological discussions, an interesting expression emerged that reflected the dynamics of the mission – *missio inter gentes*. The preposition communicating *inter* indicates a specific relationship between the mission of the Church and its addressees. Missiology, which examines the nature of the mission focuses on its relatedness and hence becomes an advocate a relational theology also relational understanding of faith, religion, ecclesiology and dialogue because God gets in between.

Keywords: *missio inter gentes*; missionary dynamic; God’s action; relationships; dialogue; theology of encounter

Słowa kluczowe: *missio inter gentes*; dynamika misyjna; działanie Boga; relacja; dialog; teologia spotkania

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